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ABSTRACT

Dialogue journals are recommended in this digest for teachers who want to involve every student in a literacy practice that unites reading and writing and encourages thinking and reflection. The digest first explains that dialogue journals are useful because they use writing as a genuine means of communication between student and teacher. Dialogue journals then are defined as bound composition books in which each student carries on a private conversation with the teacher for an extended time. The history of these journals, which were first developed by a sixth grade teacher in California, is detailed, and sample teacher-student exchanges are also provided. The digest next explicates some of the benefits of dialogue journals to students: (1) they create a one-to-one relationship between student and teacher in which both academic and personal concerns are discussed; (2) they provide opportunities to use newly acquired reading and writing skills; (3) they allow students to engage in reflection about experiences and to think about adult problems, choices, and ideas; (4) they give students a chance to engage in natural uses of different kinds of writing--narration, description, argumentation, even poetry; and (5) they let students read a personalized text, that is, the teacher's responses. Benefits of dialogue journals for young children, less proficient writers, and ESL students are also discussed, together with a brief justification for the time required for teachers to respond to each student. Twelve references are appended. (SKC)

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ERIC Digest

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Dialogue Journals

Teachers who want to involve every student, even the most reluctant, in a literacy practice which unites reading and writing and encourages thinking and reflection, may want to consider incorporating dialogue journals into their classroom practice. Dialogue journals use writing as a genuine means of communication between each student and the teacher, to get things done in the common life they share in the classroom.

What Is a Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a bound composition book in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time (school year, semester). Unlike much school-assigned writing, which is often only for purposes of evaluation, dialogue journals are *functional, interactive*, mostly about *self-generated topics*, and deeply embedded in the continuing life of the classroom. Both persons write to each other in an informal, direct style about topics of mutual interest, usually on a daily basis at elementary level, two or three times a week for older students. In a school year, even primary students can fill several composition books.

Dialogue journals serve as a bridge between natural spoken conversation, with its participants and turns, and the traditional classroom tasks of essay and report writing. They also allow students to develop more coherent self-expression and a personal "voice"—both essential aspects of writing which are often lost when basic composition skills are stressed.

Dialogue journals were developed over many years by a sixth-grade teacher, Leslie Reed, in Los Angeles, to meet several needs—to get to know her students better, to get feedback on lessons, to improve classroom discipline, and to involve each student in meaningful reading and writing. Extensive classroom observations and text analyses of dialogue journals have been conducted with both native and nonnative speakers of English (Staton 1980; Staton et al. 1987; Kreeft et al. 1985). They are now being used with first- through sixth-graders, with second language learners, with high school and college students in various content areas (Atwell 1984) and with special education populations (Baites et al. 1986).

Some brief excerpts from dialogue journals in Leslie Reed's class are helpful for understanding their conversational, interactive nature.

Gordon: *I did terrible on the math homework from last night. Math was totally terrible. I hate math. I really do hate it!*

Mrs. R.: *Come on! Give yourself a chance. You hate every new math idea and in a couple of days you're saying "I like this—it's easy!" You'll catch on—let me help!*

Gordon: *That is not true! I did not say that about fractions—did I?*

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Janinne: *I wish that I didn't win the Spelling Bee. I know I should be happy about winning but I feel worse than I ever did . . . I feel very much as if the whole world is against me. Even what I thought were my best of friends. The people I trusted now hate me. Why can't they understand?*

Mrs. R: *It is difficult to understand—and I understand and share your weird feelings! . . . It is most difficult to be a good loser! Somehow being a loser you feel better if you can criticize or "tear down" the winner. The act of destroying the winner makes a poor loser feel better.*

Although each entry is brief, from a few sentences to a page in length, the same topics tend to be discussed and elaborated on for several days, creating extended writing opportunities. Such writing works best when teachers understand the need for students to "own" their writing, allowing students to write about whatever concerns or topics they feel are important on a given day. Students ask questions, complain about lessons, describe what happened on the playground or at home, reflect on why things happen, express personal feelings—in other words, they use written language in all the purposeful ways they use their spoken language.

What Are Some of the Benefits to Students?

Dialogue journals create a one-to-one relationship between student and teacher in which both academic and personal concerns may be discussed. The journals represent a concrete application of Vygotsky's theory that learning of functional human activities occurs first through the learner's cooperative participation in accomplishing tasks with a more experienced partner. What the learner can do with assistance today can be done unaided in the future. By creating a dialogue setting, the teacher supports the student's emerging reading and writing competencies and the acquisition of more complex reasoning skills (Kreeft 1984; Staton 1984).

But dialogue journals are not a method of instruction in specific skills; they provide opportunities to use newly acquired abilities in writing and reading. As with any truly individualized practice, each student benefits in a different way. Research has shown some of the following benefits:

1. Opportunities to engage in reflection about experiences and to think together with an adult about choices, problems, and ideas (Staton 1984).
2. Opportunities to engage in a natural, purposeful way in different kinds of writing—narration, description and argumentation, even poetry (Kreeft et al. 1985; Staton et al. 1987), and to use all the functions of language.

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3. Opportunities to read a personalized text—that is, the teacher's written responses—about topics the student has initiated. The teacher's writing may often be more advanced and complex than textbooks that students are assigned to read (Gambrell 1985; Staton 1986).

Teachers of younger children find the dialogues particularly helpful in early stages of literacy instruction. The interactive dialogue, with just a few sentences each day, makes use of the young child's developed competence in oral language, as shown in this dialogue between a child (who is not yet a "reader," according to standardized tests) and her teacher, Marley Casagrande of Fairfax County.

Kelly: *I like the little red hen and Dick and Jane. I have problems some times Well I have this problem it is I am not very god on my writing.*

Mrs. C.: *I think you are a good writer. Keep on trying. I like the Little Red Hen, too, Kelly. Keep on writing!*

Kelly: *Oh kay. Do you have a problem. if you do I will help you and what are you going to be for Halloween.*

Mrs. C.: *I am going to be a farmer. I will wear overalls and a straw hat. Everybody has problems, Kelly. Some problems are big and some are small. One of my small problems is I can't stop eating chocolate when I see it.*

Studies also show that the more reluctant and least proficient writers are motivated to write in dialogue journals, and that this motivation can transfer to other writing tasks (Hays and Bahruth 1985). Over time, student entries increase in length, become more fluent, and show greater competency in focusing on a topic and elaborating on it (Staton et al. 1986).

For the ESL learner, there is an added benefit in this daily, continuous conversation: the teacher's responses provide clear, comprehensible language for students to absorb subconsciously as a model for language acquisition (Kreeft et al. 1985). Teachers become competent at writing to an optimally challenging level for each student, varying their language to ensure comprehension (Kreeft et al. 1985).

Students have their own way of explaining the benefits of dialogue journals to themselves:

> The worksheets make you answer questions, but the dialogue journal makes *me* ask the questions, and then the teacher helps me think about possible answers. (Staton 1984)

What about the Time It Takes?

Incorporating dialogue journals into a teacher's daily schedule does take time, but that time is also useful for planning the next day's lessons, based in part on the information the dialogue journals provide. Teachers find that they enjoy responding in the journals and look forward to this time.

A second major benefit for teachers is that the dialogue journals seem to improve classroom management and discipline. The journals are a long-range technique for helping individual students learn how to manage their own actions. Teachers report that the individual dialogues help them reach students who are discipline problems or are often absent.

Dialogue, a newsletter on dialogue journals, is available from CLEAR (Center for Language Education and Research at the Center for Applied Linguistics), 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037. The list of several handbooks on the subject is now available (Baites et al. 1986).

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